


‘A remarkable debut’

Jojo Moyes



the silent treatment

A lifetime together.
Six months of silence.
One last chance.

Abbie Greaves

Prologue

From above, Maggie looks to have everything under control. She deposits the tablets onto the dinner plate with her usual fastidious care. If anything, she moves through the motions of breaking the coated capsules free from the foil with even greater precision than usual, tipping the blister slowly so as to enjoy the sharp clanging sound that announces each one hitting the ceramic. Anything to break the silence.

When she has eight in front of her, Maggie retrieves from the sideboard her glass of water, untouched since lunch, and checks the oven setting one last time. Chicken pie, ready-made, so it will be twenty-five minutes. Plenty of time to finish up here. She pulls out a chair and takes a seat at the kitchen table, her back to the door. There is a sheaf of bills in front of her, all settled, but spilling over untidily. Maggie reaches into her handbag and fishes out her most treasured gift, a paperweight fashioned from a rock, decorated especially for her, and places it on top of them.

Mess contained, she clicks up her pen. A rollerball, one of the few with ink in the desk drawer of no return, with a smooth glide that seems unlikely to reignite the claw-fisted cramp a week writing in biro has induced. Her script is as neat and sharp as ever as she finishes her last sentence to Frank. If there is any fragment of doubt

in her mind, there are few visible signs. Maybe a little wobble on the comma, if you look closely.

Maggie shuts the red leather planner, and without further ado she gathers the pills in her hand, drops them on her tongue and takes a small sip of the water, casting her head back in the extravagant swallowing gesture she developed in her teenage years and has never quite outgrown in the half-century since.

At first, nothing occurs. Without moving from her seat, she goes back to trimming the beans, pushing the ends and their peculiar, fibrous tails to the corner of the chopping board. The waves of relaxation arrive after a minute or so. Maggie's slicing begins to slow, her right hand trembling on the cutting knife.

Just seconds later, she slumps forward. Fortunately, it is far too swift to process, her head suddenly dropping in the way it always would during the French-film marathons Frank lined up for wet Sunday afternoons. It is a shame he is not there to cushion the fall this time.

And this time, there is no chance she will jolt back awake.

In his study, Frank fixates on the screen in front of him. The end is in sight: a knight, a bishop and a pawn, all controlled by the computer, on a beginner's setting no less, pen in his last bastion of hope – his queen. All those academic achievements and still he has yet to progress past level two. It gives a whole new resonance to his most favourite of phrases: *persistence is key*.

In the past, when Maggie called him for supper, he would be so engrossed in his strategy that he couldn't register the sound of her voice, let alone shut down his game. Once she had plated up, Maggie would come and retrieve him herself, resting her hands on his shoulders and stroking between the blades with her thumbs until the checkmate screen inevitably appeared. 'Next time!' she would say, to buoy Frank back up. The algorithms might be stacked against him, but Maggie could never stand to see him disappointed.

Today, however, there is nothing quite so kind to rouse him. When the fire alarm cuts through his consciousness, his surprise is more that it still works than that it has gone off. Maggie has never been a very attentive cook, though at least it means they don't have to go through the ceremony of testing the smoke-detector battery with a broom handle every three months. What's more, their early years together were marked by a string of now-infamous culinary defeats: the Lopsided Trifle of '78 (the fifth or sixth date); the Concrete Cranachan of '79 (a title that earned him a night in the spare room); Gastroenteritis-gate at a birthday party hosted in their wildly unkempt back garden (fortunately only attended by forgiving close friends). Once the after-effects had subsided, each one, miraculously, made him fall a little deeper in love with her.

The alarm is shrill and insistent enough by now to cause him to exit his game and, after a minute wondering whether Maggie is already on to it, to go and tackle the blighter himself. He can smell the smoke before he sees

it. Ahead, in the oven, something has burned, been forgotten perhaps while Maggie takes one of her increasingly frequent lie-downs. Turning off the dial with one hand, he reaches for the souvenir tea towel looped on the door handle to begin to disperse the smoke. It is thicker than he first thought and even Cornwall's finest dishcloth isn't going to cut the mustard. Fresh air. That is what he needs. It is only when he moves to open the door that he sees Maggie.

It is not the empty pill packet at her side that gives it away. Nor the spilled water glass, nor the vegetable detritus sprayed around her wrists. It is the pain in his chest. It is the carpet being pulled from under him, the walls giving way, the ceiling caving in – every awful infrastructure analogy unfolding as he realises what Maggie has done.

He touches her wrist in the hope of finding something there: a flutter, a twitch, anything. Maybe it isn't too late.

His hand hovers over the telephone cradle. He has never been good with calls and there is a moment when it is touch-and-go whether he will back out altogether.

'Hello, emergency service operator. Ambulance, fire, police or coastguard?'

Silence.

'Hello, emergency service operator. Ambulance, fire, police or coastguard?'

Silence.

'May I remind you that making a call to the emergency services as part of a joke or prank is an offence and a risk to lives.'

'A-a-ambulance,' Frank manages, just in time, the vowels rattling in his throat before tumbling out in a barely audible torrent.

'Sir, you will need to speak up for the ambulance operator. I'll connect you now.'

'Ambulance service. What's the address of the emergency?'

'Forty-three Digby Crescent, Oxford OX2 6TA.' Frank's voice sounds hoarse, unfamiliar, so unlike how it has sounded to himself, these past few months.

'Can you tell me exactly what has happened?'

'It's my wife, Maggie, she's ... she's taken too many of her pills, her sleeping pills.'

'We're sending someone now. Is she conscious, sir? Can you feel if she has a pulse? Any sign of her breathing?'

'I ... I don't know. I can't say for sure.'

'Sir, do you have an idea of whether this was intentional?'

Silence.

'Any additional information you can provide at this stage may prove invaluable to our response. Has your wife recently mentioned any desire to harm herself? Any previous depressive episodes?'

'Well ... the thing ... the thing is, we haven't spoken for a while. I mean, *I* haven't spoken to her for a while ... It's been ... nearly six months.'

Her Silence

Chapter 1

There is nothing as unsettling as the hospital waiting room. The banks of plastic chairs with their picked and pinched vinyl covers, the quiet hum of the vending machine, the collective intake of breath when the intensive-care consultant comes in with news – more often than not directed elsewhere – it's as if every aspect of it is designed to keep you on edge. And that's before you consider why you are there in the first place.

Maggie always said patience was *my* virtue, as if good qualities were something to be divvied out in a marriage, along with the weekly chores. I can see her now, waiting for a text or an email or a guest, one knee jiggling up and down on the sofa, the other stilled under my palm as I try to calm her down. So much energy compressed into such a small person. I often wondered how she didn't exhaust herself entirely, worrying about everyone and everything. I never wanted to change her, I just wanted to make sure that all that nervous energy didn't get her tied up in knots so tight that even I couldn't unpick them. I had forty years of success in that regard and now here we are. It's never too late for things to change.

Above my head, the clock releases an extra-heavy tick as it announces the hour. Being kept waiting this long cannot be a good sign. Maggie would know. Four decades as a nurse and she would surely have a good handle on

her own diagnosis. That and the sheer volume of hospital dramas she consumed. 'Awful tachycardia,' she would tell me with great confidence as we sat side by side on the settee of a Saturday evening in front of the latest episode, reaching across for the remote and amending the volume to compete with the sound of her own commentary. 'Shame, though, such a young man to be found that ill ... It does always seem to affect those city-slicker types, doesn't it? Awful stress they put up with every day ... '

'Professor Hobbs?' A doctor is standing in front of me with his hand extended.

'Yes, yes, that's me,' I say, beginning to rise from my seat. There is something sharply efficient about this doctor that radiates from the slick parting in his hair all the way down to the shine on his shoes. Even his name badge is pinned perfectly parallel to the seam at the bottom of his shirt pocket. I suddenly feel very aware of my own appearance and redundantly run a hand through my hair.

'I'm Dr Singh, the consultant in charge of your wife's care. Could you come with me, please?'

I follow him back through the double doors and for one, hopeful moment I imagine I am being taken to Maggie. Instead, I am ushered into a side room opposite the lobotomy bays and feel the final dregs of my wishful thinking sink away. The doctor takes a seat at the computer and gestures me towards the other chair as he starts the machine and shuffles through a wedge of papers on the corner of the desk. A freestanding fan behind him tickles at the edges of the loose documents.

'Sorry. Bit hot today, eh? No idea when this will break.'

I feel the doctor's understatement in the sweat that is beginning to pool under my arms. I don't have the strength to make even a half-hearted remark about the weather and look down at my feet instead.

His computer burbles into life, covering up my awkwardness. After a minute or so, he exhales. 'Professor Hobbs, I will cut straight to it. The prognosis is not good. When your wife arrived here last night her central nervous system was shutting down. Fortunately, the paramedics managed to secure her airway, which was a feat given how long she might have been unconscious by the time she was found. However, it is still too early to say what the effects of the oxygen deprivation will be. For now, she is in an induced coma. Once we have a clearer idea of the extent of the damage we can look at all our options, with your input, of course ...'

This is my cue to speak. I have missed enough of those this past year, but I still know by rote the signs that come with it – the querying eyebrow, the tilted head, the impatient throat-clearing. The doctor settles for the latter.

'Ah, Professor Hobbs, I can appreciate how difficult this is for you, but please rest assured that we are doing all we possibly can for your wife. In the meantime, there are resources at your disposal. Our family-support team has—'

'I don't need family support,' I cut in, my voice coming out hoarser than I remember, quieter too.

'Well, yes, Professor, I agree that it is not for everyone. I see from your records that you have had a referral before? To the support team here? Not followed up on ...'

He looks up from his screen and I reach for my glasses. I pick up one of my loose shirt tails and begin to rub at the smears across the lenses, although I am not sure that I am improving the situation. 'An avoidance tactic', as Maggie always put it. She was right about that.

'Look, it is not for me to say what you should do. I can't force you to see them. Just, well, bear it in mind, Professor? They are here for you and available twenty-four/seven. We see situations like this more often than you would think, and they are specially trained ... The important thing is that you know you are not alone here.'

The irony. That is exactly it. I am alone. More alone than ever before. More alone even than before Maggie, because how can you truly know what it is like to be alone until you have felt complete?

'As I say, there is little we can do at this stage beyond observe Mrs Hobbs's progress, so we would advise you to return home at some point for some sleep, some food. First, though, if you would like to see her, we can bring you to your wife now.'

'Yes,' I murmur. 'Yes, yes, I need to see her.'

'Professor, I'm sure I don't need to reiterate this, but we do so to all relatives: your wife is in a very delicate state. Please do not be alarmed at how she looks and if you have any concerns at all, please don't hesitate to let myself or one of the nurses know. We have kept her in a private room for the time being, but there are a lot of staff around, should there be any problems.'

The doctor begins to stand and I follow suit, knowing all too well that it takes a little longer these days and not

wanting to draw his attention to my sixty-seven years any more than is strictly necessary. Do they give up earlier if they feel you are too old? If you don't have enough grieving children at your side? For Maggie's sake, I hope not.

I accompany the doctor out, filing past the queues of walking wounded, down a corridor of discarded wheelchairs and hurrying, harried staff navigating the endless complexities of eye contact with relatives. I wonder which other families are greeting their worst nightmares today. Soon, the curtained bays peter out and the doctor swipes us through to intensive care. Beyond, there is a series of single doors, each one with a metal handle to depress.

Maggie is behind one of them. I can tell by the way the doctor slows, reaches up to check he has his pager, looks left and right. I want to say 'No,' pinning his arms to his sides and holding him stock-still. But what difference would that make in the long-run? I cannot avoid facing up to what I have done forever. I try and tuck my shirt in as best I can and then shove my hands deep into my pockets to stop them shaking.

There is a quiet click as he pushes the door open with both hands. He goes through, holding it ajar for me, only my shoulders are broader than he has calculated and there is an awkward moment where I have to shunt sideways to follow him, bending my head as I do so but still managing to knock it against the top of the door frame. I have never quite got the hang of being the tallest person in any given room.

At first, in the dim lighting of the room, it is difficult to make Maggie out. The bed is elevated and surrounded by an arsenal of machinery clunking away. It is hard to believe her life now relies on a machine not altogether dissimilar from the dehumidifier I would heave down from the attic on Maggie's instruction for its annual winter stint in the cellar. I move closer and as my eyes adjust to the half-light, I feel a breath catch in my throat. It exhales as a low moan that clearly concerns the doctor.

'Professor, I'm so very sorry—'

'May I touch her?' I ask, brushing over his apology and inching closer to her side.

'Yes, that should be fine. One of the nurses will be in shortly to explain more about the routines they have in place. They will be well placed to discuss Mrs Hobbs's day-to-day care. Here, let me give you some time alone together.'

For a second, it is as if we are newly-weds again, the B & B owners beating a hasty retreat in case we are about to jump each other before the door has even swung shut. I would give anything to be back there now – Maggie wild and impulsive, me straight-laced, awkward, yet somehow always enough for her.

She seems smaller here, propped up against those awful hospital-issue pillows. Her hands rest on the sheet, as dainty as ever, the cannula sitting flush against the prominent veins and her papery skin. There is no chair by the bed. Clearly I am not expected to stay. How can I leave her here? She would be so frightened, were she awake. Frightened by the situation certainly, but more by

having no one to speak to, no one with whom to share her observations and every other waking thought. I know I have let Maggie down. I know she has needed so much more than a silent sounding board over the last few months.

When I touch her now, slowly, as if trying not to frighten a skittish neighbourhood cat, her hand feels warm. It is so horribly unnatural. Even on the warmest summer evenings, I could always rely on Maggie to place her cool hands on my forehead after the cycle home. I have spent a lifetime being called upon to act as a human glove and draw some circulation back into her palms. Now this? We needed each other. But more than that, we chose each other, we wanted each other – you will never know just how great that feels until it is taken from you.

Behind me, there is a shuffling. I turn, gently, without breaking contact with Maggie. The nurse has arrived, the blue plastic covers over her shoes rustling on the linoleum as she takes readings from the screens at the back of the room. I have no idea how long she has been there but she notices when I look round and I sense she may have been sent to keep an eye on me.

'I can bring you a chair if you'd like?' she asks, her Yorkshire accent warm and reassuring. 'It can't be good for you, all that standing.' She is clearly young. She can't be more than, what, twenty-five? She has the sort of easy charm that Maggie always had, a way of lighting and lightening up the room all at once. It sends me right back to forty years ago, the drizzle and the street lamps and

a drunken rendition of 'Good King Wenceslas' providing the soundtrack to our first encounter.

'Shall I?' she prompts, interrupting my trip down memory lane. 'Really, it's no trouble, I promise.'

'Thank you. I'd be very grateful.'

For the best part of twenty-four hours, I have kept it together but it is at this very act of human kindness that I feel I am ripe to come undone. The nurse returns shortly and even goes to the trouble of folding the seat out for me. I suddenly feel like the guest of honour at the most unpalatable picnic of my life.

'What's your name?' I ask, not bothering to try to decipher her name tag in the dimness or run the risk of scrutinising another woman's chest at my wife's bedside.

'Daisy,' she says. 'None too dainty like one, though, I'll admit.'

I try to smile. The whole bottom half of my face feels like it is cracking with the effort.

'I am sorry, really very sorry to see this,' Daisy says, noticing as the corners of my mouth begin to drop. For a minute, maybe more, we both watch Maggie, her chest rising and falling with regimented efficiency, her lips slightly parted as if in a permanent state of surrender. Everything about this is not her. The discipline, the hush, the fuss of nurses providing the sort of kindness Maggie spent a lifetime expending and eventually being punished for.

'You can speak to her, you know,' Daisy says. 'It's so quiet here, often people feel scared to speak aloud. But you have to push through that. Let your wife hear your voice.'

I gulp. I wonder what Daisy would say if she knew. She seems so much wiser than her years and I'm sure she has seen more than her fair share of suffering in this line of work. Even so, could she understand?

I think back to the day my voice first failed me. I was so close to confessing what I had done. I'd seen the consequences laid out before me and the guilt was so pure, so overwhelming, that I knew I had to tell Maggie. The words were on the tip of my tongue, or at least I thought they were. I had geared myself up as I tiptoed up the stairs to our bedroom.

Then I rounded the corner and I saw her, in the half-light, struggling to sit up to reach a glass of water on the bedside table, a shadow of who she used to be, and I knew I couldn't risk hurting her any more than she already had been. She was barely hanging on; I couldn't bring her more bad news. I couldn't tell her what I had to, not when it meant she would leave me. Every day when I couldn't speak, in the silence, I lived with that same guilt, the same burning shame. I was suffocating myself, but somehow anything was better than the thought of telling Maggie what I had done and losing her for ever.

Daisy clears her throat lightly to bring me back in the room. 'I'm no doctor, don't get me wrong, but I can say what I have seen, and sometimes it is a familiar voice that will do it, more than these tubes ever will. The patient hears you. It reminds them of all the good things they have to wake up for. Spurs on the recovery, you know?'

I don't know but I nod regardless. I can see how much she cares about Maggie, even if she is just one of an extensive list of patients. Daisy has large fingers, long and thick, but they move so tenderly as she works to straighten the fabric at Maggie's neck where it has bunched up under the tubes. It's the sort of gesture I know Maggie would appreciate.

'You could tell her your news,' Daisy prompts. 'You've probably got plenty to say anyway, after the day you've had. Or maybe there's something that's been on your mind that you want to share?'

'Well, I've certainly got that.' My attempt to sound light-hearted comes out as it really is – sheepish and forced.

'Pardon? I didn't catch that. You're muttering,' Daisy says, taking one final reading from the monitor next to Maggie and flipping her pad shut.

'Sorry – yes, I do have something I need to tell her. Something important. I don't know why I didn't tell her before.'

The understatement alone is enough to crush me. I press my fist hard against my lips and force myself to look at Maggie square on. How did I never realise just how small and fragile she has become? She has always been tiny – a good foot shorter than me. The first winter we lived together, I couldn't wrap my head around the sheer volume of jumpers she needed to wear on her miniscule frame just to function around the rental flat. The dubious central heating didn't help matters, Maggie hopping from one foot to the other like an aerobics

instructor while I bashed at the buttons in the boiler cupboard to no avail. I learned early on that she brought her own warmth wherever she went.

'Now isn't the time to be hard on yourself. Ease Maggie in. Don't blurt it all out, mind – you don't want to scare her away. Definitely not at first. Try and keep it positive. Remind her she's loved. Tell her about all those times you showed her that.'

My face must read wild-eyed panic as Daisy lays a hand on my shoulder, a subtle pressure that flattens the crumples in the cotton of my shirt.

'Don't worry about it too much. Just talk to her. Don't let this time get away.'